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Swing Votes Could Deliver Contra Aid

By Robert Parry
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President Reagan faces a tough but potentially winnable battle to resume military aid to rebels fighting Nicaragua's leftist government, according to an Associated Press survey of key swing votes.

In the Democratic-controlled House, where the main legislative battle is expected, only a few swing members said they were leaning toward voting with Reagan on lethal military aid. But that could be enough for the president, considering the 64-vote majority he received for nonlethal aid last year.

An AP survey of 33 swing votes from last year's House battles over aid to the counterrevolutionaries, or contras, found 13 "against or leaning against" Reagan's lethal aid plan, 17 undecided or not available and three "leaning for."

But because Reagan had a 64-vote victory margin on the nonlethal aid vote last June, the Democrats must win back nearly all the swing votes or persuade other House members who normally back the president to switch.

Many of those swing votes, who supported Reagan's request for \$27 million in nonlethal "humanitarian" aid to the rebels, say that the president cannot count on their support for open military aid. "It's one thing to give economic aid," said Rep. Tommy F. Robinson (D-Ark.). "It's another to give lethal aid."

Other House members expressed concern over the size of Reagan's expected request when the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings balanced-budget law is forcing deep cuts in domestic and military spending.

But Reagan partisans say that if the president can present the request as part of a strategy for forcing the Nicaraguan government to negotiate seriously with the opposition, Congress might support him.

"All of the trends have been negative for a diplomatic solution and the behavior of the Sandinista regime," said Rep. Edwin V.W. Zachau (R-Calif.), one of last year's swing votes, who says he is leaning in favor of military aid.

Rep. John P. Murtha (D-Pa.) also indicated he would likely stick with Reagan on lethal aid. "He has generally supported the president's efforts in Central America," said press secretary Bill Allen.

Although the Central Intelligence Agency provided the rebels with an estimated \$80 million in covert military aid during 1981-84, the new request would provide the first open military assistance from the United States to the insurgents.

The vote, likely in February, will be the first major test of the "Reagan Doctrine"—U.S. backing of anticommunist guerrillas fighting leftist or pro-Soviet regimes.

The 33 House members surveyed were the swing votes last year when the House went from narrowly defeating Reagan's nonlethal aid request, 215 to 213, in April, to passing nonlethal aid, 248 to 184, in June.

They are:

Michael A. Andrews (D-Tex.), undecided
Les Aspin (D-Wis.), no response
Albert G. Bustamante (D-Tex.), undecided
Ronald Coleman (D-Tex.), no response
James Cooper (D-Tenn.), undecided
Butler Derrick (D-S.C.), undecided
Dante B. Fascell (D-Fla.), undecided
Hamilton Fish Jr. (R-N.Y.), undecided
Bart Gordon (D-Tenn.), undecided
Willis D. Gradison Jr. (R-Ohio), against
W.G. (Bill) Hefner (D-N.C.), undecided
Frank Horton (R-N.Y.), leaning against
Ed Jones (D-Tenn.), leaning against
James R. Jones (D-Okla.), undecided
Paul E. Kanjorski (D-Pa.), no response
Cathy Long (D-La.), leaning against
Buddy MacKay (D-Fla.), against
Romano L. Mazzoli (D-Ky.), no response
Dave McCurdy (D-Okla.), leaning against
John R. McKernan Jr. (R-Maine), leaning against
Stewart B. McKinney (R-Conn.), against
Alan B. Mollohan (D-W.Va.), undecided
John P. Murtha (D-Pa.), leaning for
Melvin Price (D-Ill.), leaning for
William B. Richardson (D-N.M.), against
Tommy F. Robinson (D-Ark.), leaning against
Olympia J. Snowe (R-Maine), leaning against
John Mck. Spratt Jr. (D-S.C.), undecided
Richard H. Stallins (D-Idaho), leaning against
Wesley W. Watkins (D-Okla.), undecided
Charles O. Whitley (D-N.C.), against
Jamie L. Whitten (D-Miss.), no response
Edwin V.W. Zachau (R-Calif.), leaning for.